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Social problems should be attacked as a totality. Yet, many of the problems of rural areas result from current concern for urban difficulties to the exclusion of an equal concern for nonurban situations. Social workers who are involved in rural areas and their problems should have the following skills: (1) sensitivity to minority and ethnic groups, (2) well-developed skill in community organization, (3) knowledge of solutions to social problems, (4) skill in implementing solutions, and (5) a capacity for productive short term relations in both client-centered and community centered roles. Educating such practitioners would require: (1) a heavy concentration of community organization methodology, (2) initial integrated practice sequences in lieu of early concentration in a specific practice, (3) social policies and services related specifically to rural environments, and (4) field placements in a rural agency or situation, with opportunities for autonomous practice and short term contacts. (LS)

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EDUCATION FOR SOCIAL WORK IN RURAL SETTINGS

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...over the past four or five years, [social agencies]  
have expressed increasing concern about the ineffectiveness of  
present program and organization structure in the field of  
social welfare in responding to and meeting need in rural areas  
and small communities....There is recognition that the methods  
and structural patterns used by urban communities in developing,  
coordinating, and financing their individualized services are  
not applicable to the small communities.

The words are not this writer's. They were taken from a proposal to fund a  
project on basic services to small communities, prepared by a special committee  
of the National Social Welfare Assembly some fifteen years ago. The funds were  
not forthcoming and the project was abandoned.<sup>2</sup> As has too often been true, a  
serious social problem was discussed by social work, but no action was taken to  
resolve it.

Remarkably little has been done in recent years to alleviate the problems  
faced by rural Americans. Inadequate and inappropriate social services are only  
parts of the deprivation encountered in rural communities.

It is the thesis of this paper that there are special needs in rural America  
which require the intervention of uniquely educated social workers. With that  
need in mind, some principles under which such education might be conducted are  
offered.

### A Rudimentary Polemic

For one who is identified with non-urban America, the temptation to prepare a polemic on social work's neglect of rural and small community issues is great. Little is being done to promote concern about action to resolve social problems in the provinces. In addition, many of the profession's leaders seem unaware and unconcerned about rural life. With but little effort, one could develop an indignant indictment of the National Association of Social Workers, the Council on Social Work Education, and the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. But there is much to be said about educating people who can give social work leadership to these areas, and a polemic would detract from that message.

Therefore, this discussion offers, first a brief review of the crucial problems facing rural America. Second, it introduces some generalizations about rural life and the implications of these for social work practice. Third, it outlines some curriculum proposals for the education of rural practitioners.

### Some of the Problems of Rural America

Of greater concern than any other issue is the fact that rural communities are losing their populations. According to the President's National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty, the counties which, according to the 1950 census, were totally rural (lacking any city or town of more than 2,500) had lost 15 per cent of their population by the 1960 census.<sup>3</sup>

There are several implications of this which are covered in various writings.<sup>4</sup> Some view the migration as a major cause of the current urban explosion. On the other hand, others note that most urban rioters have lived in one city or another for most of their lives.<sup>5</sup>

Some writers are concerned that the withdrawal of rural young people saps the smaller communities of their potential leadership. Those with the highest promise

of future service leave, it is said, while the least talented people remain. Yet, others testify that the departures represent sound decisions, since talented people would only waste themselves in rural areas.

As Michael Harrington has observed, there is no comprehensive action being taken in relation to rural population decreases. A variety of isolated programs operate in ways that often tend to negate each other. For example, there are small programs designed to help people make the transition from rural to urban life. These operate at both ends of the cycle. In the rural areas, counsellors of various kinds help the migrants prepare for their new homes and educate them for survival in the cities. In the cities there are programs to help families become located and comfortable in the new environments.

There are also programs designed to enrich rural areas and to enable them to hold their people. Some agencies, such as the Appalachian Regional Commission, are purported to be designating growth areas within the region. These areas will be encouraged to grow and thrive while other areas will be left alone to ultimately disappear.<sup>6</sup>

In essence, there are programs working in opposite directions without a comprehensive plan. And most of the programs seem to be financed, at least in part, by the one organization that could propose and carry out comprehensive plans - the federal government. More than anything else, this probably reflects America's uncertainty about the wishes for the future of rural areas. When the nation cannot make up its mind, it often develops opposite solutions which cancel each other's effects.

### The Quality of Rural Life

Whether it is a cause or an effect, the quality of rural life offers some clues to the reasons for emigration to the cities.



Rural communities have obvious shortcomings for all their citizens. Even the wealthy, who can purchase many of the amenities of urban life, and transfer them to rural areas, are often deprived of legitimate theatre, high-quality education, adequate highways, museums, and libraries. Shopping is difficult and varieties of goods are few.

One-room schools still exist in many rural areas. Vocational education is often unavailable. There are not enough physicians, dentists, social workers, or guidance counsellors. While there may be romanticized advantages to rural life such as good hunting and good fishing and freedom from big city "pressures," the lacks in basic public services are often astonishing.

For the forty per cent of the poor who live in rural America,<sup>7</sup> life can be impossible. There is often no kindergarten or day care facility. When there are jobs, they are often located in urban areas miles away. And there is no public transportation available, in many areas, to make the jobs accessible.

That work which is available is often of the most menial quality. Thus, many young people prefer the cities where the variety and quality of work are purported to be superior.

One may encounter tenant farmers who are absolutely bound to their landlords and unemployed coal miners, who are not sufficiently skilled to hold the high-paying jobs in the new, automated mines where there is a shortage of workers. And migrant workers. And blacks who have been touched not at all by civil rights legislation. And Mexican-Americans whose accents, skin tones, and clothing cause them to face the same kinds of discrimination encountered by American Negroes. And Indians who are never employed, rarely spoken to, and often jailed by the dominant population.

And those are some of the reasons for the migration to urban areas.

## Lack of Democratic Institutions

The style and quality of rural government also reflect the inadequacies of rural life.

Even if it is the law of the land, it isn't the law in Norman, Oklahoma, a school principal once told this writer. And that's the way things often are in smaller communities. One has little difficulty finding overt racial segregation, lack of suffrage, unbelievable corruption in government, and poverty programs run for the benefit of local officials in rural areas. As Richard W. Boone and Norman Kurland put it:

...planning and the delivery of resources to rural areas are still based on the naive assumption that democracy is working in rural America.<sup>8</sup>

That is simply the way it is. Thomas Jefferson's convictions to the contrary, there is more likely to be something close to democracy in the randomly selected urban ghetto than there is in the randomly selected town of 2,000 or fewer inhabitants.

Psychiatrist Robert Coles offered an example of rural governmental discrimination in a poignant portrait of a Kentucky Appalachian. The forty-one-year-old father of nine, who was no longer employable in the coal industry, described his difficulties in securing emergency food stamps:

Now either you're going through an emergency or you're not. I have to borrow food at the end of every month, and they know it. I have to go begging at church and with my kinfolk down the creek to pay for those stamps every month, and they know it. I should be on public assistance, and they know it. But they [the county officials] get everything federal that comes through here, every bit, every dollar, no matter what the senators meant to do in Washington. It may say on paper that the money is for us, but the money goes to the county people, the people who get all the money that comes in here. And they don't intend to let anyone in on the gravy who isn't right in their pockets. I remember when I asked them to send that school bus nearer. They told me, 'You'll live to be sorry you ever asked.' Well they were right - though from day to day I wonder if I'll live much more and be sorry about anything. It can't get much worse than it is.<sup>9</sup>

There is a variety of other issues. Agricultural policies tend to operate, as everyone must know by now, to the advantage of the wealthy, large farm corporation and to the detriment of the small farmer. State tax structures often work to the detriment of any positive action in the states where rural problems are greatest. To make matters worse, the historic rural control of state legislatures has come to an end because of Supreme Court decisions. And while these decisions seem, to this writer, forward steps in the securing of a democratic society, they obviously operate to the disadvantage of rural areas.

Lest rural areas be described too dismally, it should be mentioned that most of the problems of rural life quality are surmountable.

It would seem important for social workers preparing to serve in smaller communities to be aware of issues such as these. They point to the significance of social policy expertise for rural workers, which is discussed later.

#### Some Notions about the Characteristics of Rural Areas

While they are not necessarily problems, rural life has many characteristics which make it different from life in the contemporary metropolis. The following sections identify some of the rural community's special characteristics and suggest some implications for a unique kind of social work practice.

#### Rural Ethnic Groups

The incidence of social problems is not randomly distributed among the subgroups of rural America. Calvin L. Beale, Leader of the Population Studies Group of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service, said, in the National Manpower Conference on the Rural to Urban Shift,<sup>10</sup> that most rural white people have no special problems when they move to cities. Young men and women from Iowa farms, for example, survive about as well as white people with urban backgrounds in metropolitan areas. According to Mr. Beale, when one speaks of rural

people with problems, one usually means persons who belong to groups with a high degree of cultural or linguistic visibility. Specifically, these groups are rural Negroes, Southern Appalachian whites, Mexican-Americans, and American Indians.

Characteristic of all four groups, Mr. Beale said, is endemic poverty, a very low average age, and such a high fertility rate that they can double their number in a generation. Thus, rural poverty is, as much as anything else, minority group poverty. If anything, the assimilation of minorities into rural culture is slower than it is in urban areas where, as Daniel Moynihan and Nathan Glazer have persuasively indicated,<sup>11</sup> minorities are easily identifiable.

In rural America, one may find identifiable groups of Germans, Poles, Bohemians, Czechoslovakians, and a variety of other European groups which have long been assimilated in many urban areas. These are in addition to the more typically considered minorities such as American Indians, Negroes, and Mexican-Americans. Harry Caudill discusses this phenomenon as it applies to Appalachia in his Night Comes to the Cumberlands.<sup>12</sup>

The social worker who hopes to serve in a rural area must be peculiarly sensitive to the special problems and characteristics of minority groups and must be agile in communicating across cultural lines. However, training in sensitivity to other cultures has not been a major emphasis in social work education, despite frequent admonitions for social workers to understand the non-middle class, non-white sub-communities.

There are few general cultural theories in existence which would be helpful in educating social workers for sensitivity to cultural differences. Probably the best of these is Edward T. Hall's The Silent Language,<sup>13</sup> which represents a schematic, comprehensive approach to understanding any culture. It differs from most other anthropological approaches in its avoidance of isolated anecdotal



descriptions of individual cultures. Most social work education on the subject of culture tends to follow the anecdotal pattern which is often pertinent only to the group studied and may therefore be misleading. At its worst, anthropological discussions of cultures enrage, because of their inaccuracy, the cultures they describe. The reaction of the Negro social workers who thought they had heard too many inaccurate stereotypes of Negroes at the 1968 National Conference on Social Welfare is instructive.

### Work with a Smaller Scale of Living

Another characteristic, the smaller life scale of the rural community, has implications for social work education. Impersonal services and formal relationships are difficult and strained in an environment where everyone thinks he knows everyone else. Taking positions which are essentially different from those dictated by the conventional wisdom of the rural county or town can lead to social ostracism and even a loss of one's position. Every disenchanted rural Community Action Director, school superintendent, or minister usually has an abundance of stories about people who lost their jobs after confrontations with the "power structure."

Anonymity is often difficult in the rural town and separation of one's private self from one's work is almost as difficult. Overt violation of local norms will almost always end in defeat.

It should be said that the smallness - perhaps pettiness - of rural life is not appreciably different from that found in urban environments. There are some who would say that rural communities are tightly closed societies - the best examples of Floyd Hunter's idea of a power structure.<sup>14</sup> However, that is not always the case. All that is implied is that the smaller community lacks room for maneuvering. The professional person in a small town has nowhere to go once he has violated the

town's norms or offended its people - at least its most powerful people. In an urban environment an outspoken minister or an anti-establishment social worker may find allies who will join him or provide support for his efforts. He can work for change in his own organization or start a new one. There are people available who are potential supporters. The rural professional is far more limited. The smaller the town the fewer the power bases.

Nevertheless, a smaller scale of life does not imply simplicity. Rural communities are often as difficult or more difficult than urban communities to understand. Many of their characteristics may be based upon little-remembered but still influential historical events dealing with family conflicts, church schisms, and a variety of other occurrences which may deserve the status of legends. Novelists such as Grace Metalious, John O'Hara, and Thornton Wilder have memorialized the complexity of small-town life.

In addition, it often takes months of investigation to understand the power relations of institutions in the small community. Things are often not as they are supposed to be. Murray Ross has written of communities in which the Rotary Club was as powerful as the local government.<sup>15</sup> The writer has been in communities where the local bank was a subsidiary of the Chevrolet dealership and where the volunteer firemen had more to say about the local schools than the Board of Education.

Rural social workers need not, however, absolutely identify with the norms of the community. But they must be able to accept those norms and to work for change at a pace, as Murray Ross would put it,<sup>16</sup> acceptable to the people themselves. Those who are too quick to tell others their faults are unpopular in the metropolis and the village. The results of such disenchantments are simply more rapid, persuasive, and dramatic in the village.

Interpretation, education, and re-interpretation, may be seen as essential elements of the functioning of the rural social worker. A willingness to accept change as a gradual phenomenon without deluding oneself into accepting and becoming a part of the status quo is equally important.

Differences in scale of life seem to also imply knowledge gaps. Somehow, despite the availability of national magazines and television, information on what is going on in the United States frequently seems to by-pass the rural communities.

Rural newspapers and radio stations infrequently concentrate on national and international concerns. Space in newspapers is limited because the newspapers are small. It is local news that sells newspapers. And, when the community is served by only weekly newspapers, the information gap is even greater.

Similarly, the information available about rural America is also limited. One of the dramatic revelations for this writer upon coming to West Virginia was that it had a prominent Roman Catholic population. Though it is small, the Roman Catholic community is fairly affluent and politically influential in parts of the state. The state also has a tradition of active trade unionism. Realizing this, John F. Kennedy's victory in the 1960 West Virginia primary seemed less difficult to understand. That victory - which was publicized as a miracle in what was described as an almost totally white Protestant state - also began to appear less significant. Thus, one of John F. Kennedy's most dramatic victories would have seemed less dramatic if West Virginia had been better understood.

### The Rural Social Welfare Structure

Of overarching significance to social workers is the rural social welfare structure.

The organization of services in rural America differs markedly from that which is normally presented as the ideal social welfare model. There are few agencies and few professionals. While social work education helps students focus on the interlocking character of social agencies and educates practitioners to work between agencies, little is taught in the typical social work curriculum about the special creativity required for working within a social welfare community that is not, by strict definition, a social welfare community.

The social worker in a rural setting is likely to be employed in one of the basic public agencies. Only the most basic kinds of services will be offered in rural areas, which is, perhaps, a commentary on the profession's trend toward massive services on urban levels without commensurate services to rural populations. In the county seat, which can be near but is as likely to be far away from large numbers of people, there might be a welfare department, a child welfare protective unit, and, perhaps, a department of public health. The social worker in a rural setting is typically a part of one of these agencies, or, less frequently, of a community action agency.

Perhaps the most pervasive quasi-social welfare agency in the rural area is the agricultural extension office. Often associated with it is a home demonstration agency. The traditional purpose of these programs has been to advise farmers on making their crops more abundant and advising rural housewives on food preparation and other domestic matters. More recently, these extension and home demonstration agents have assumed more generic roles. They help organize adult education programs and social activities. Some consider them the original community development specialists. More than a little of current community organization theory comes out of the practice experience of these specialists.<sup>17</sup>



These programs are often administered by state land-grant colleges. Both state and federal funds (under provisions for special projects which receive federal monies) are used to operate extension services.

Despite the similarity of their concerns, however, there does not seem to be any widespread cooperative work between rural social workers and extension workers. One effective way to educate social workers for rural areas might be field instruction in an extension agency. (This year the West Virginia University Division of Social Work is establishing a field unit with the Appalachian Centers, the West Virginia extension service. The field experience will be supplemented by seminars on the social work components of the assignment to be conducted by a Division of Social Work faculty member.)

Several other implications for education for practice in rural areas come to mind. First, the rural social worker, functioning in one of only two or three agencies in the total area, must be capable of autonomous work. Whereas the urban professional must know how to work with others as a team member, supervising the work of others, or being supervised by a more highly skilled or experienced worker, the rural worker must be capable of self-direction. He must be able, frequently, to develop his own professional guidelines and compel himself to practice professionally. He must enforce his own ethics for there will be few others available to keep him functioning properly. Because of the simple lack of numbers, the rural social worker must practice his profession in a manner significantly different from that of the urban professional.<sup>18</sup>

Second, the rural social worker must know how to encounter professional stimulation on his own. Whether that means attending an unusually large number of conferences or making a monthly drive to an NASW meeting many miles away, the

professional isolation of the rural worker makes such efforts more important than they are for workers in large agencies, who can receive professional contacts and stimuli during coffee breaks.

Third, the rural social worker must know how to create and use social services that are not, in the traditional sense, social services. Social problems occur in rural areas just as they do everywhere else. And, as is true everywhere else, the community establishes services to cope with the problems. But they are not services in the traditional mold and it often takes careful investigation to discover and understand them. The functions normally handled by Travelers Aid, for example, may be assigned to the sheriff, who houses transients in the jail overnight. Family planning may be taught, in the absence of a physician or nurse, by a chiropractor or naturopath or witch doctor or faith healer. If any counseling is done, formally, it is done, perhaps, by the Methodist minister who had some college psychology courses.

The rural social worker must, then, know how to identify a hidden structure of social services. Furthermore, he must have the tolerance to assess its strengths and help it improve rather than disregarding it because it is non-professional. In some cases, when his help is desired, the rural social worker is most helpful in teaching institutions to enlarge their services.

Third, the social worker in a rural area must have highly developed skill in initiating and nurturing occasional, short-term contacts with both clients and non-client members of the community. That is true because the rural worker often serves several communities, visiting a given town once each week or twice each month or twice each year. The bulk of his work between visits must be done by telephone and written communication. Therefore, the worker must have the capacity for rapid relationship-building with all sorts of people in all sorts of roles.

Although the rural worker may be able to develop long-term relationships with clients in his base location, most rural workers must not count on seeing any individual more than quarterly because of the wide areas served by rural agencies. So the worker must know how to make the occasional contact count and how to insure that work with the client or client system will continue under the auspices of the existing organizations which fill the roles of social agencies.

### Educator, Consultant, and Guide

Thus, helping people to help others is frequently the most important role the rural worker plays. And it is a role of educator, consultant, and guide - a role markedly different from that of the direct service worker.

Among the most significant tasks of the rural worker could be monthly orientation meetings with local ministers to help them deal with congregants they are helping with emotional difficulties. Or the worker may find himself cast in the role of helping local policemen (a really rural community has two police officers - one for the day and one for the night) understand and deal with juvenile delinquency. Or one might help school officials and teachers devise a strategy for coping with a high drop-out rate or alcoholism and glue-sniffing in the youth community.

Where there are no specialized agencies to cope with the specialized problems of the community, the worker must help the community find solutions to identified problems.

In many ways the rural social worker's task is to help the existing institutions - community action agencies, extension agencies, schools, churches, civic clubs - bolster the quality and quantity of the services they provide. This consultant-educator function is as important as anything else the rural worker does. However, it is a role for which social work education seldom equips its graduates.

A pervasive need in rural America is for new, creative approaches to handling rural problems. After working with social agencies in the supposedly under-developed nations of Mexico and El Salvador it appeared, to this writer, that the United States could learn a great deal about solving rural problems from them. In El Salvador, for example, rural villages were served by regional "brigades" which regularly visited each small population center with a team of specialists. Those specialists included home economists, recreation specialists, agricultural technicians, health aides, and adult educators. Physicians visited each area on a weekly schedule, too. For the most remote areas, four-wheel drive vehicles, small airplanes, and helicopters were used to bring services to the people. Mexico's public health programs operated in somewhat the same way. Thus the most isolated villages received services comparable to those in the large cities. Plans of this kind were proposed for rural America by the National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty<sup>17</sup> but have not been widely implemented.

The possibilities of providing such basic services as social casework, dentistry, and preventive medicine - services which are often unavailable in rural America - are great under such a plan.

### Rural Community Organization

Some of the most appropriate tasks of the rural social worker are in the field of community organization. And just as community organization takes many forms in urban settings, so it must in rural areas.

One major responsibility is often that of helping the people of the community relate to each other around problem issues. This can be of crucial importance in rural communities which are split along ethnic lines. While communication is not the answer to most ethnic clashes, it is usually an important first step.



Therefore, intergroup relations programming would seem to be well within the scope of most social workers serving ethnically divided rural communities.

Of course, the pleasant verbalizations of a seminar on intergroup relations are not always the answer. Thus rural social workers may at times find themselves negotiating between two or more conflicting groups or organizing groups for social action purposes. The kind and quality of community groups for social action must be based, obviously, on the kinds of problems faced in a given rural community.

Helping the orchard workers in Delano, California, organize a union and, ultimately, to negotiate an acceptable contract with their employers would seem to be a compellingly correct role for the rural social worker.

It is significant that the President's National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty, when it rendered its report, viewed community organization as the major answer to the problem it sought to solve. They saw community organization as a way of helping the poor in rural areas articulate their positions and, ultimately, to assume participant roles in the decision-making processes which affect their lives.<sup>20</sup> Those who see community organization as an answer to basic social problems such as mental illness, poverty, and delinquency would suggest that the rural social work practitioner must be especially adept at community organization.

### Social Policy Expertise

However, a careful assessment of rural problems would indicate that the basic knowledge and skill required by a non-urban social worker is expertise in social policy development. As has been indicated already in this discussion, the problems of rural America which result from inadequate social policy and planning overshadow those resulting from other causes.

If the rural social worker is to be genuinely effective he must be able to help the rural community formulate policies which will help it overcome the causes

of its problems. It is likely that social policy guidance is the most important contribution a properly educated social worker could make in a rural area. Of course, this implies that preparation of social workers for practice in rural America should include a heavy concentration on social policy development and implementation.

Of course, many rural institutions harbor myths about American life which prevent their taking positions which are in their self-interest. However, often they simply lack expert guidance on the best answers to their own problems. For example, many rural communities - particularly local Chambers of Commerce - are seeking ways to prevent overt conflict between ethnic groups. This may not represent a radical change in their philosophical position toward minority groups. However, it is clear to most businessmen that turmoil is bad for business. Finding means for avoiding turmoil such as involving minority group businessmen in Chamber activities, raising minimum wages, providing adequate housing, and changing the educational system may or may not become apparent to the local leadership. An outside expert, such as a skilled social worker, would know what had worked in other places and, because of his communication with the total community, would know what kinds of solutions would work in a given community.

It is becoming increasingly evident that the most serious deterrent to effecting social change is a lack of skill in getting things done. Solutions to problems seem to be available. Commissions such as the President's National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders and the National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty developed viable answers to some of the most severe problems of the times. The same can be said for any well-financed commission. There are answers available for many problems and if the commissions employ competent staff social scientists they are likely to find those solutions. Of course, the current state of social science knowledge cannot guarantee perfect answers nor can it predict all of the reactive fallout from a given program of action. However, there are answers and many of them will work.

The social policy skill crisis is in the implementation of solutions. It is one thing to know how a problem may be overcome and another to implement those findings. Somehow, that is the point at which social scientists and social workers bog down into vague discussions of letter-writing campaigns, demonstrations, and the passage of resolutions. It has been well-indicated by recent history that only the most dramatic of these efforts will have a decisive effect on the course of public policy. The assassination of Senator Robert Kennedy and the outraged letters from private citizens which followed affected gun control legislation. The Alabama nightsticks, firehoses, and police dogs turned on Dr. Martin Luther King and his non-violent protestors altered the course of civil rights and voting rights legislation. But these dramatic exceptions prove the rule - that influencing public policy is complicated and difficult.

A rural social worker who knows how to get things done is likely to be most valuable to his community. A social worker who can help build and mobilize a constituency, secure legislative action in the state legislative body or in the United States Congress, help local institutions make themselves potent in the state and federal administrative and regulatory agencies and in interstate quasi-legislative bodies, is a valuable aid to the community.

As has been mentioned, today's most pertinent social work skill is in helping people get things done. Migrant laborers can demonstrate their anger better than any social worker, no matter how closely he is identified with their problems. However, a well-prepared social worker will know how to help the migrant articulate his anger into focused change efforts. He will also remain sufficiently detached to be able to help those who are organizing to communicate and negotiate with their employers.

The role of the social worker who functions on behalf of the client system has been interpreted, by some, as one in which the worker acts in the same ways

as his constituents. It would appear obvious that such behavior is self-defeating if it is followed under all circumstances. There is a professional, enabling role to be played in conflict situations. The social worker is often better equipped to play it than anyone else involved. And he can often perform his most important service by playing it well.

### Conclusions and Curriculum Implications

It has been suggested in this discussion that many of the problems of rural areas are results of current concern for urban difficulties to the exclusion of an equal concern for non-urban situations. The President's National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty summed it up well in its call for action:

...we must act now because the rural poor, in their desire for the same goods and services enjoyed by most urban people, continue to pile up in the central cities of America. Yet, for many migrants who lack the training and skills for employment in the cities, the move is like jumping from the frying pan into the fire. The result is frustration, despondency, and despair.

...The problems of rural America and central city America are closely linked through migration. A high proportion of the residents of our cities formerly lived in rural areas. Many more are one or two generations removed from a rural parentage.

The senseless piling up of refugees from rural America in our central cities provides no solution to the problem of rural areas or of cities.

...This Commission questions the wisdom of massive public efforts to improve the lot of the poor in our central cities without comparable efforts to meet the needs of the poor in rural America. There is danger that programs limited to the needs of our central cities will be self-defeating. If economic and social conditions are greatly improved in our central cities without comparable improvement in rural areas, additional incentives will be created for migration to the cities. In the end, therefore, the special housing, education, employment, and other special programs for the central cities may lead to increased migration, thereby complicating the very problems we are trying to solve.



All social workers, if they are to understand the causes and implications of social problems, must understand the phenomenon of one social solution creating another social problem.

Two additional conclusions come to mind about the roles of social workers in non-urban settings.

First, while rural poverty is a major concern, not all rural social work is done with the poor. Some of the traditional social work functions designed to help people overcome socio-emotional problems are as important to the middle and upper income rural family as they are to deprived groups. And a social work strategy which neglects or is overtly hostile toward major segments of the community - particularly when those segments have a good deal to say about what will happen in the community - is likely to have difficulty succeeding.

Second, the findings of the Commission on Rural Poverty seem to have been largely ignored.<sup>22</sup> They are sound conclusions evidencing quality research. The lack of implementation of these findings serves to further emphasize the need for skill in getting things done. Knowing what the problems are and having clear notions about solutions is insufficient. Knowledge of strategies for change is equally, if not more, crucial.

### The Central Skills

The social worker who is to work in a rural setting needs special skills. It is probably fair to say that the major requirement is for a higher degree of basic skill in the practice of social work than would be necessary in urban settings. That is because the rural social worker often functions without the supervision, consultation, and stimulation that are available in larger urban agencies and communities.

Of course, an opposite effect seems to occur frequently. That is, the most skillful social workers gravitate toward metropolitan communities. It may be

fair to suggest that part of their reason for doing so is that the profession has developed its best-paying and highest status positions in the metropolitan areas. And the thrust of the professional literature - as anyone who has tried to research the subject of social work in rural areas knows - has made it appear that the challenges are in the cities and that the rural areas are in the process of irreversible death pangs. Such conclusions are not necessarily valid. But the self-fulfilling prophecy can become operative and, in effect, make the rural decline irreversible.

Heading any list of required behavior skills, the rural social worker needs special capacities for brief, intensive relationships with both clients and lay people because his work is often done on a regional or multi-county level. Perhaps those skills are most closely related to community organization practice, which is often the foundation for rural social services.

Community organization must be a primary service even in agencies specializing in social casework. The mobilization of limited rural resources is a priority issue in productive social work.

Since most social workers in non-urban settings work as administrators of some sort, class and field experiences in social work management take on even greater importance for education of smaller community workers than they do for other workers.

Another requisite skill is the capacity to help groups of citizens work together on mutual problems. That is, the establishment and enhancement of communication between majority and minority groups, rich and poor, social agency clients and non-clients, is often a priority matter on the agenda of rural social problems. To be more specific, the smaller community worker must know how to plan and organize a meeting, structure a banquet, and conduct a seminar.

Skill in social policy development is another major educational goal for the social worker who is to practice in rural areas. This implies an ability to help

communities find workable solutions to social problems, but more important, it means that rural social workers must have an ability to help communities find means for implementing those solutions through administrative processes, legislative action, and local negotiation.

To summarize, the special profile of the rural social work practitioner would be characterized by a high degree of sensitivity to minority and ethnic groups, well-developed skill in community organization, an understanding of social policy development, knowledge of solutions to social problems, skill in implementing solutions, and a capacity for productive short-term relations in both client-centered and community-centered roles.

Educating such a practitioner would require the standard social work curriculum's emphasis on human behavior - particularly the behavior of groups and communities - along with a heavy concentration of community organization methodology.

Such a concentration would not be to the exclusion of casework and group work methodology. But it would require a higher degree of community organization learning than is found in the typical social casework or social group work curriculum. In many ways, the integrated practice sequences being developed by several schools of social work seem ideally suited to the multi-functional non-urban worker. Typically such sequences eliminate labels such as casework, group work, research, and community organization. Instead, they offer broad areas of practice concentrations. Thus, a social work student first learns practice as a totality. He may later concentrate in one of two or three "tracks" such as "clinical practice," "social strategy," "macro intervention," "micro intervention," or some other newly chosen label. Such organizational plans tend to reflect something closer to social work practice as it is or as it ideally would be than the historical fragments of case, group, and community work.

In terms of social welfare policy and services, there should be special information descriptive of the rural environment and how it came to be as it is. Effective solutions to rural problems and means of implementing them are as important curriculum items, it would seem, as anything else offered the student.

The field experiences of a person headed for service in a rural setting would also be unique to such settings. Ideally, the field placement would be in a rural agency or situation. It would provide opportunities for autonomous practice and short-term contacts quite different than the traditional pattern of working with a limited number of cases, groups, or community committees under intensive supervision. Certain social work education innovations such as the non-social agency field placement should be readily adaptable for rural social work education.

To summarize, if this nation is to overcome its most profound social problems it will have to attack all of them as a totality. Anything else will continue the wasteful practice of solving one problem to the detriment of another. If social workers are to make a contribution to such solutions, there will need to be a skilled cadre of rural specialists, along with the urbanologists, to effect solutions to the total problem syndrome of the era.



## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup>National Social Welfare Assembly, Inc., "Proposed Project on Basic Services to Small Communities." (mimeographed), 1954.

<sup>2</sup>Letter from Gordon Mansen, Associate Executive Director, The National Assembly for Social Policy and Development, Inc.

<sup>3</sup>The President's National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty, The People Left Behind, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup>The summer, 1968, issue of New Generation, published by the National Committee on the Employment of Youth, carries thorough discussion of this issue. Also pertinent are the proceedings of the National Manpower Conference on the Rural to Urban Shift, held at Stillwater, Oklahoma, in the spring of 1968. Lee G. Burchinal, editor, Rural Youth in Crisis, published by the Office of Juvenile Delinquency of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, is an impressive collection of papers on youth problems in rural areas. Theodore W. Schultz's article "Our Welfare State and the Welfare of Farm People," in The Social Service Review, June 1964, is another helpful discussion of the unique socio-economic dimensions of rural life.

<sup>5</sup>Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, New York: Bantam Books, 1968, p.111.

<sup>6</sup>John Fischer, "The Easy Chair," Harper's, October, 1968.

<sup>7</sup>The President's National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty, Op.Cit., p. 3.

<sup>8</sup>Richard W. Boone, and Norman Kurland, "A Look at Rural Poverty," New Generation, summer, 1968, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup>Robert Coles, "Appalachia: Hunger in the Hollows," The New Republic, November 9, 1968.

<sup>10</sup>These comments are based on notes taken by the writer during Mr. Beale's address at the Conference.

<sup>11</sup>Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Beyond the Melting Pot, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The M.I.T. Press, 1963.

<sup>12</sup>Harry M. Caudill, Night Comes to the Cumberland, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1963.

<sup>13</sup>Edward T. Hall, The Silent Language, Fawcett Premier Books, 1959.

<sup>14</sup>Floyd Hunter, Community Power Structure, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1953.

<sup>15</sup>Murray G. Ross, Case Histories in Community Organization. New York: Harper and Row, 1958.

<sup>16</sup>Murray G. Ross, Community Organization: Theories and Principles. New York: Harper and Row, 1968.

<sup>17</sup>The extension service has problems, too. An article in the October 19, 1968, New Republic (Emmett Peter, Jr., "Keeping 'Em Down on the Farm.") indicates there is only one Negro among the county agricultural agents in the United States. The author charges that Negroes employed in extension are paid less than whites. The extension service is controlled, says the article, by well-to-do white farmers for their benefit, rather than the benefit of the rural poor.

<sup>18</sup>There have been few writings on the special functioning of rural social work. Charles E. Hendry presented a paper on "Community Organization Teamwork in Rural Areas" to the 1953 National Conference on Social Welfare. Arthur Robbins and Clara Louise Myers spoke on "How Social Work Education May More Effectively Serve Non-Urban America" at the 1960 Annual Program Meeting of the Council on Social Work Education. Norman A. Polansky, et. al., "Child Neglect in a Rural Community," Social Casework, October, 1968, gives some clues to Southern Appalachian family structure and its implications for social work practice.

<sup>19</sup>President's National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty, Op.Cit., p. 87.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., Chapter 11.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>22</sup>The August, 1968, edition of Mountain Life and Work, a publication of the Council of the Southern Mountains, reports the granting of \$100,000 by the Ford Foundation to establish an institute on rural development. Former Kentucky Governor, Edward T. Breathitt is directing the institute which will focus on research, planning, and demonstration of comprehensive solutions to rural governmental problems. Spindletop Research, Inc., of Lexington, Kentucky, is the formal grantee and it planned to conduct most of its early work in Kentucky and North Carolina.